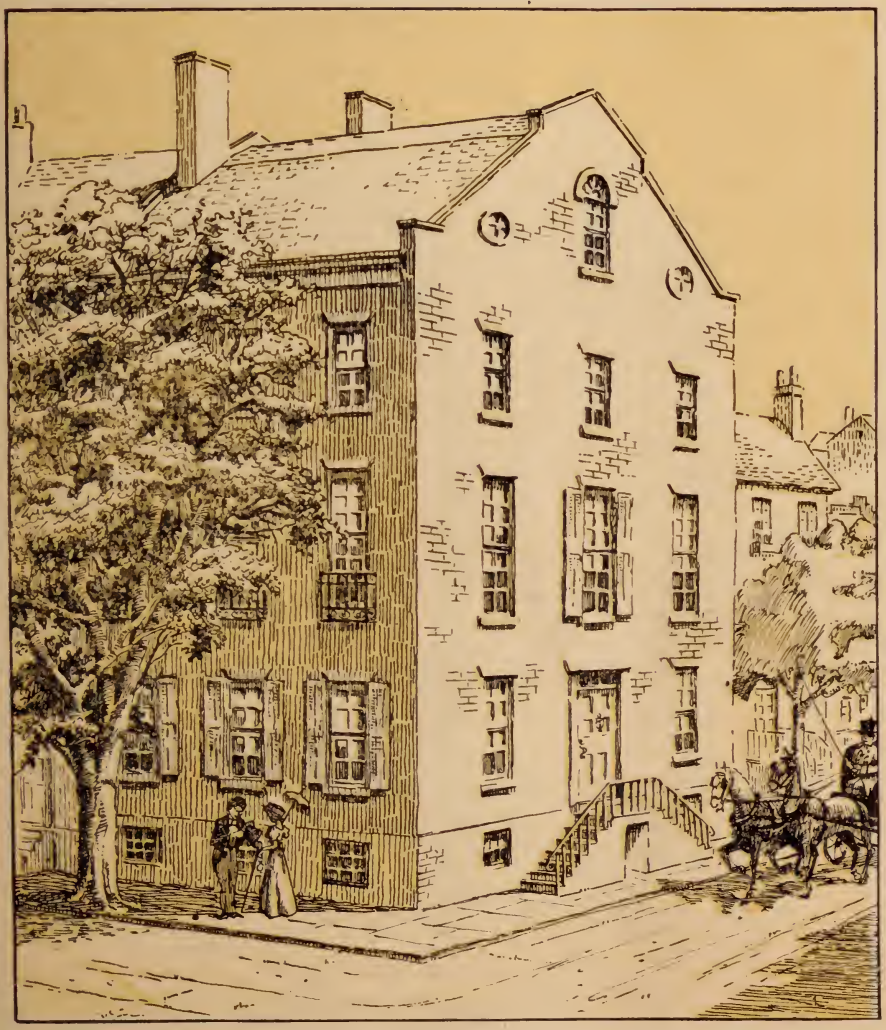
William Street

the Insurance Center of the World



November, 1937

EDWARD A. ST. JOHN

AVERY
DURST

The Katherine of CLERMONT

DR. Mitchell, a member of the Assembly of 1797 of the State of New York, was a practical man. A hard-headed business man of that type which a large section of the press is constantly reminding us should be at the helm in legislative affairs, he was not given to flights of fancy. Consequently it was with some embarrassment that he arose in the Assembly to propose a bill in which he had little faith. In those times legislators were known from time to time to be guilty of such triflings with their sense of the fitness of things.

"Excuse me for laughing, gentlemen," was his introductory remark to the assembled statesmen, "But I must bring up that bill of the Chancellor's for a boat to sail by steam." The bill entailed granting to Robert R. Livingston the right to navigate the inland

Robert Fulton from a painting by himself.

waters of America by steamboat. When the laughter had died-down a lively debate ensued upon the merits of the bill and many pertinent questions were asked such as, "What is a steamboat, anyway?" and "What time is it, I'm hungry?" But the originator of the bill settled all difficulties with the telling arguments that, — "The commissioner is a good fellow." "We all want to oblige him." "It won't do him any good or us any harm." "We have had the bill before us for almost a year and we all want to get rid of it."

Robert R. Livingston, American Ambassador to France and backer of Robert Fulton in his steamboat ventures.

Before such a cogent presentation of the facts all opposition wilted and the bill was passed. Thus was the legislative way laid open for Fulton's Folly.

Robert Fulton was an art student. This was remembered against him later by all sensible people. He had gone from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to England to study painting. He seems to have become discouraged with that career and when next we hear of him he was conducting an experiment for the British Admiralty.

He had built an underseas boat and had been given permission to try it out on an abandoned hull. Fulton's torpedo boat blew the hull out of the water. The British Admiralty, acting in the same grand tradition which was later to turn down Ericcson's ironclad then lost interest in the vessel, deciding it was worthless. Fulton left for France. Napoleon was at that time busily engaged in civilizing Europe and the young inventor thought that perhaps his torpedo boat might be accepted as an efficient minister of the

Left—Crowd watching Clermont's progress up the Hudson River. July 18, 1807.

Below—Robert Fulton's first steamboat.

gospel. Unfortunately the realm-leader was too busy at the time to give an audience to the young man from the provinces and turned him over to an under-secretary. That nameless tool of destiny reviewed Fulton's plan and reported to his master that it was ridiculous. His master then absent-mindedly dismissed the whole idea and returned to the more congenial task of giving orders to destiny.

This left Fulton at rather loose ends in Paris, and while there

Fulton's first steamboat on the Seine, Paris.

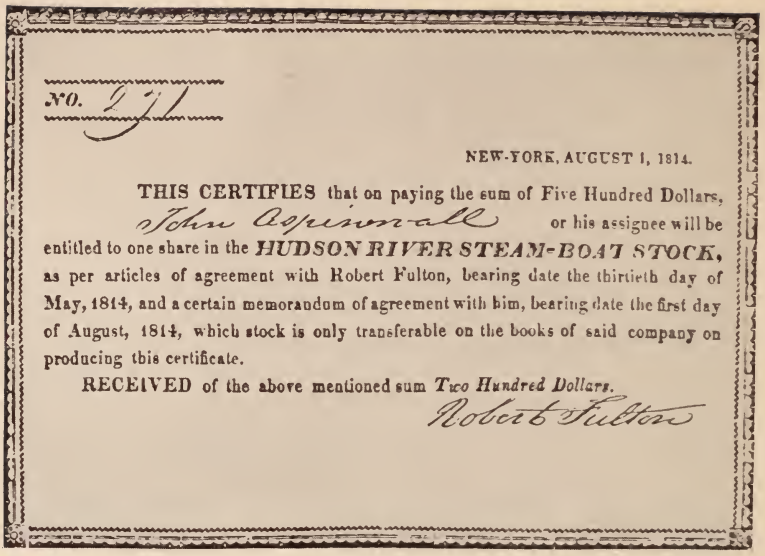
he accidentally ran into Robert R. Livingston. Both men were interested in the possibilities of steam navigation and a Frenchman had just made a demonstration of a steam vessel on the Seine. Fulton had theories and Livingston was a man interested in theories. Together they resolved to return to New York and attempt the building of a boat for commercial purposes. Thus Mars in his shortsightedness lost for a time an effective instrument of war. It was not until the steamboat had approached some degree of perfection that he was to make use of it.

The activities in the shop at No. 1 Broadway were the cause of much innocent merriment. It seems that the man in the street in those days was almost as practical as the Assemblyman. As the solid fellows said, "I may not know much about engineering, but

Launching of the Fulton the First—1814.

I got common sense, and common sense says that no boat can run against both tide and wind. Besides, wasn't this fellow Fulton an artist once?"

The work, however, went on and at length, on July 18, 1807, the *Katherine of Clermont* took to the water, majestically making her way out from Cortlandt Street to the middle of the North River and turning her nose northward. Loud cheers broke forth from the bank of the stream, possibly due to the fact that the boat was now in safe territory when the inevitable explosion should occur. The explosion did not occur, however. In fact nothing did. The boat at first stood motionless, holding her own against the tide, then slowly but surely began to drift downstream. Livingston, on shore, was in agony. Fulton, on board, was reasonably perturbed likewise,



No. 271

NEW-YORK, AUGUST 1, 1814.

THIS CERTIFIES that on paying the sum of Five Hundred Dollars, John Aspinwall or his assignee will be entitled to one share in the HUDSON RIVER STEAM-BOAT STOCK, as per articles of agreement with Robert Fulton, bearing date the thirtieth day of May, 1814, and a certain memorandum of agreement with him, bearing date the first day of August, 1814, which stock is only transferable on the books of said company on producing this certificate.

RECEIVED of the above mentioned sum *Two Hundred Dollars.*

Robert Fulton

Facsimile of Hudson River Steamboat Stock Certificate issued in the amount of five hundred dollars for one share and signed by Robert Fulton.

for the boat, stern-foremost, continued drifting toward the open sea. She was not built for a trans-Atlantic voyage. The crowd began to cheer wildly. A half hour went by before Fulton, in shirt-sleeves and begrimed, appeared from the engine room. One last look over the scene on deck and he gave the orders to start the repaired engine. A shudder ran through the frame, the boat stood still and then at last began to move up the stream against wind and tide. The fight was won; she had no more difficulties. The band on the pier played "The World Turned Upside Down."

The crowd went home, chastened for its disbelief. Never again would it be so quick to judge a man as an impractical dreamer; or, well, hardly ever. A few years later, a canal across the center of the state was known as "Clinton's Ditch". Common sense, it seems, dies hard.

SHIPS A SAILING

Wall Street at the East River, showing the old Wall Street Ferry.

It was the Port of New York in those days and no mistake. There are more ships making out today, but somehow we very rarely think of ourselves as living in a sea-port town. Then you could not forget. South Street was a forest of masts and, mixing with the strong clean smell of salt water was the sharp headiness of fresh timber as new keels were being laid. Strange men jostled each other in the streets. Malay and Lascar, small quick brown men, the big blond Swedes and Norwegians, the swaggering British and the raw-boned Yank. Night

Shipping along West Street N. Y.

was as bright as day with whale oil flares dancing and spluttering along the waterfront. For the work must not stop, night or day. The East was open, yellow gold was to be made, and shipping was King. "Heave, away Jacky, on the windlass breaks. We've said good-bye to Nan and Moll and we're off with the tide for Chiny."

> "In eighteen hundred and forty-six
> I found myself in a hell of a fix
> A-working on the railway, the railway, the railway
> Oh! poor Paddy works on the railway."

So the chanties rolled from river to river, sailors singing as they worked, the long wailing song that sailors sing of everything but the sea. And it may well be that many of the crew hated the sea, for in those days many a man did not sign on till he was several days out, after wakening in the stuffy forecastle with a furry tongue and a parched throat, his last recollection a brimming glass in a Cherry Street dive and a smiling stranger across the table. There was gold to be made in China and it could not wait for the laggard. A few drops in a glass and Jack is aboard. Never mind what he wants. He'll work as soon as his stomach stops heaving. Work is better than a touch of the marlinspike on his thick farmer's skull. Work and like it. When he comes back around the horn again he'll walk with a roll. He'll hit New York town with a curse for the mate and a pocket full of tin. No more sea for him. He for the land and a lass

Lower end of Manhattan Island during the Sail Ship days.

that loves a sailor. Next week he ships again with only the clothes on his back. Only this time they need no drops in a glass. Jack's a sailor and none of your blasted plowmen.

Yes, shipping was king. There was gold in sea-water. You've heard of Astors, of course. John Jacob the First was a sea-going miner. When Napoleon and the crown were at each others throats, they forbade all shipping with the enemy. America had no warships to convoy her merchantmen and American bottoms were locked in port by government order. Then did John Jacob find himself a Chinaman, dress him in silk and tell Washington that here was a Celestial of high rank. Returned he must be to his homeland or forever the displeasure of China would work against the shipping of the Republic. China was out of the war zone and Astor's *Beaver* was let set sail. No one looked at her manifest when she weighed anchor. All fought for her cargo when she returned. A hold full of teas, spices and silk cleared $400,000 for the Samaritan.

And that was the way it was done. Yankee packets swept the seas. They opened the Orient. They settled California. Thus Manhattan, settled by Dutch landsmen, people looking for anchorage, in turn became a jumping-off place for new adventure, ever westward, westward to the east. Today the circle is complete and the first lands touched by the westward voyagers themselves look toward their west, with what results the world still waits to know.

EDWARD A. ST. JOHN.

In attempting the sorrowful task of recording the passing of Edward A. St. John, Vice-President of National Surety Corporation, we prefer to picture him as William Street and the Insurance Fraternity generally knew him best.

After serving eight years as President of Joyce & Company, Chicago General Agents, where his masterly salesmanship put him far in the lead of all surety producers in Chicago, he came to New York in 1916 as Vice-President and Assistant to the President of National Surety Company. Plunging immediately into the maelstrom of hectic business activity in New York, preceding the entry of our country in the World War, Ed St. John very soon made his presence felt in no small way. Contract Bonds, of weird and unusual forms, had to be written in huge amounts. His marked ability and his engaging personality won the confidence and respect of all those with whom he came in contact. After our entry into the war, much of his time was spent in Washington cooperating with the War and Navy Departments and the emergency governmental agencies that had been so hurriedly thrown together. At this juncture his innate diplomacy and tact smoothed the pathway not only for the National but for all surety companies engaged in the bonding of war contracts.

Elevated to the Presidency of National Surety Company in

1922, his flair for production was felt throughout the entire field organization of the Company. Respected and admired by competitors because of his high ethical standards, he was beloved of our own field force. His interest in the progress and welfare of young men entering the surety business is traditional, and he never lost touch with those who received their first encouragement and sage advice through his sympathetic guidance.

His genuine pride in the success and progress of former associates, even when they became aggressive competitors, was a source of complete satisfaction to him. His interest in young men was not confined to the insurance business. Having a life-long interest in military affairs, he was instrumental in placing dozens of young men in West Point and Annapolis.

As President of the Casualty & Surety Club of New York and of the International Association of Casualty & Surety Underwriters his infectious enthusiasm and sincere interest in the welfare of the surety business was everywhere manifest—cementing friendships, reconciling differences, and healing the sores of a hotly competitive business as no other man could have done.

Essentially a man's man, he loved life and he loved people. He played as enthusiastically as he worked. Popular, friendly and congenial, his cheery presence will be sadly missed at the gatherings of those who were fortunate enough to know him.

ON THE STREET

On the "Street" today are many distinguished personalities who are carrying forward the best traditions of the insurance business. It, therefore, seems altogether fitting and proper that this section of "William Street" should be devoted to brief sketches of those persons who are now making William Street history.

J. LESTER PARSONS

A half century would bring a man a long way back in the history of insurance in this country. It would, in fact, carry him half way to the beginnings of sound practice in the industry. That is the record of J. Lester Parsons of Crum & Forster, who, last year, celebrated his golden jubilee in the profession.

Mr. Parsons entered insurance with the United States Fire in 1886, at their offices at 113½ Broadway. These were small offices, but large enough for a time when business was conducted by longhand and companies wrote risks very timidly. Yet even in those jittery days of the industry, he soon

won a reputation as an outstanding man and progressed steadily in his chosen field, moving from his first company to the North British and Mercantile, and from there to the North River an as underwriter. His explanation of the reasons for the recognition of his ability is the modest disclaimer, "I guessed a few of them right".

Shortly after this, the firm of Crum & Forster was organized, first starting as an agency and gradually controlling the various companies that now go to make up the group. Mr. Parsons was one of the five original partners in the organization, and when the ravages of time had diminished the original group and reorganization became necessary, he was the only one of the original five to remain as a director.

Active in sports, Mr. Parsons is vice-president and governor of the Essex Country Club. He is interested in golf and swimming and is the owner of a fast cruising houseboat in which he spends most of the winter off the coast of Florida.

Perhaps the best tribute that WILLIAM STREET can pay to him is to quote from the testimonial presented him by two hundred agents and brokers on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary:

"Born in the era of free and independent thought and action which developed the strong personalities of business and industrial leadership, characterized as rugged individualists—your knowledge of human nature has made you flexible enough to meet changing times and conditions and you have retained the ability to work with and inspire other men."

JOHN McPIKE KERESEY

JOHN McPike Keresey, Director of Thomas & Mortimer, Inc., of 42 Broadway, entered the insurance field in 1931, after having won success in two other fields, with time out for war.

Mr. Keresey was graduated from Georgetown in 1916, and during the next year, he became assistant to the executive Vice President of John W. Masury & Son, manufacturers of paints and varnishes. In another year, he was overseas amidst the big guns of the artillery. His service brought him through the major engagements of Verdun, the first and second Argonne offensives and St. Mihiel. As Second Lieutenant, his gun crew was cited by the French for service in the second Argonne.

After the war, he returned to Masury & Son with whom he stayed until 1922, when he joined the Tannin Corporation, manufacturers of extracts for tanning leather. With this firm he was in charge of foreign and domestic shipping, foreign exchange and manager of insurance. The Tannin Corporation was the U. S. subsidiary of the Forestal Land, Timbers and Railways, Ltd., of London, England, and its business was world-wide, including purchases in South America, England and South Africa.

In 1924, he entered the engineering field, serving his training period with the William F. Kenny Company. After two years with that company,

JOHN MCPIKE KERESEY

he formed the Hol-Ker Corporation, electrical engineers and contractors, of which he became president, having been the principal stockholder. This company built, among other things, the largest steam power station in the United States and the first "Robot" transformer. They also installed the Rotary Transformer stations, new type, on the Independent Subway system, being the only organization then qualified to do so. The average yearly contracts of the firm ranged between three and four million dollars.

Hol-Ker Corporation and its subsidiary, the Kerry Electrical Contracting Corporation, were liquidated in 1931, when Mr. Keresey formed the firm of Thomas & Mortimer, Incorporated, to engage in the insurance business. The executive personnel consisted of those previously connected with the two electrical corporations. The name Thomas & Mortimer was taken from two ancestral family names of the Keresey family and was chosen purely for sentimental reasons.

Outside of business hours, Mr. Keresey is an all-around sportsman, with a keen interest in baseball, hockey, football, tennis and golf. He is a member of the Board of Governors of the Green Meadow Golf Club and was formerly president and chairman of the Greens Committee.

Mr. Keresey, a member by birth of the American aristocracy, deserves also a place among the aristocracy of business for the contributions he has made to the two great modern industries of engineering and insurance.

WILLIAM STREET

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ON THE COVER

GENERAL Matthew Clarkson, famous Revolutionary War hero and Civic leader in New York, purchased the site of the Clarkson family residence which was destroyed by fire while the city was occupied by the British and in the early part of 1793 erected thereon the three-story brick house illustrated on the cover. The entrance was on Pearl Street at first, but was subsequently changed to Whitehall Street. It continued to be General Clarkson's home during the remainder of his life.

AVERY CLASSICS